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## Sharon Lamb & Jen Gilbert (Eds.): The Cambridge Handbook of Sexual Development: Childhood and Adolescence

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### Abstract

The editors of *The Cambridge Handbook of Sexual Development: Childhood and Adolescence* say they have been “less concerned with outlining expected paths from sexual immaturity to maturity than with critiquing the possibility of a normative theory of sexual development”. It is offered as “an interdisciplinary conversation amongst leading sexuality scholars”. It merits this description to the extent that its 50 contributing authors have collectively presented a wide range of theoretical and critical perspectives, with supporting empirical information; this will be of great interest to its intended readership, which appears to be mainly those involved in sex, health and relationships education. However, the interdisciplinary aspect is undermined by the editors’ evident belief that biological understandings can be offered as a relatively minor feature rather than as a fundamental aspect of the subject that needs to be integrated throughout. Other significant weaknesses include sparse attention paid to child as opposed to adolescent sexuality and total silence as regards the plight of proto-paedophilic minors.

**Keywords** Sexual development · Childhood · Adolescence · Childhood sexuality · Adrenarche · Transgender

What is sexual development?

The fifty, no less, experts contributing to the weighty, 602-page, *Cambridge Handbook of Sexual Development: Childhood and Adolescence* do not have a clue. Or rather they present a plethora of perspectives grounded in conflicting concepts. As the editors candidly admit in their Introduction:

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What we did not do is tell contributors what we meant by “sexual development.” And, in their responses to our invitation, contributors have not cleared this up.

My comment in the margin at this point was “Idiots all round then, basically, failing to define their terms”, but perhaps this was a bit harsh given the complexity of the subject. What sort of “thing” we think sexual development is, even supposing it can be agreed the term has sufficient coherence to withstand scrutiny, will inevitably vary depending on the theoretical approach taken. Differences of emphasis given to the development of the individual (broadly, psychology) or the social context within which the individual develops (broadly, sociology) are especially prone to conflicting understandings and there are other dimensions of potentially irreconcilable division. The editors speak of:

The restless turn to various theoretical frameworks – sexual script theory, psychoanalysis, Foucault and discourse analysis, new materialist theory, dynamical systems theory, and figural and relational sociology...

It is a vertigo-inducing prospect. Already we feel the ground begin to shift beneath our feet. What if we read the entire volume? Will we drop down an intellectual rabbit hole into a blunderland where nothing hangs together and there is no escape into a meaningful world of positive policies and strategies for things that matter, such as good sex education? The suspicion that this may be the case is reinforced when we hear from the editors that “we have been less concerned with outlining expected paths from sexual immaturity to maturity than with critiquing the possibility of a normative theory of sexual development”.

But who reads any of these monumental, multi-author manuals anyway? Maybe no one goes from start to finish apart from (perhaps) the editors and anyone foolish enough to review the blessed things. Readers can be expected to drop into at most a few chapters that seem particularly close to their concerns, ideally starting with some sort of overview of the field—the main theories, concepts, findings—perhaps, followed by one or two topics of more specialist interest later in the book.

Bearing this in mind, who is the *Cambridge Handbook* meant for and will it help them? The blurb put out by publishers Cambridge University Press turns out to be totally silent on the intended readership, and editors Sharon Lamb and Jen Gilbert are almost as coy, saying only near the end of their 12-page Introduction:

We hope that educators will use these chapters to stimulate classroom conversations that go beyond the status quo, and to free new scholars to take up these questions in their own original ways that push the boundaries.

Educators? Scholars? It's a tad vague. A clue is offered by the fact that 10 of the 50 contributors have “health” and “education” specified in their official job titles, while a reading of the entire *opus* reveals this is a work that will probably feel more relevant to those at the front line of sex, health and relationships education than to either “ordinary” parents or academic researchers.

In this regard the *Cambridge Handbook* at least has its heart in the right place, with an emphasis throughout on challenging and disrupting the binary,

oppositional pairing of (sexual) adult and (asexual) child, while also querying/queering other key binaries: masculine/feminine, good girl/bad girl, heterosexual/homosexual. The effect is to open up conceptual space in which the “agentic” child and adolescent can move into view, taking the stage as active players in their own lives instead of being positioned merely as the passive recipients of dreary exhortations to avoid catching diseases, getting stuck with babies or falling victim to predators. While acknowledging the vulnerability of the young, it works positively with the notion of the “being” child who is living right now and who has any human’s valid interest in life’s risky but rewarding relationships and pleasures; this challenges the hitherto all but hegemonic figure of the “becoming” child—one who might be allowed to live a little, eventually, but only somewhere far way, over the rainbow in distant adulthood.

The *Handbook* claims to take an inter-disciplinary approach but a strong bias towards sociology and cultural accounts of sexual development are obvious from the list of contributors onwards, at the expense of biologically grounded studies. For those whose background is in psychology and biomedical sciences, this could be a useful corrective although one doubts there will be many such “cross-over” readers.

The questions addressed and the presentational approach are straightforward, reasonable, and orderly. The first part of the book is given over to the initial question, “What is sexual development?”, with “Children” and “Adolescence” considered separately (albeit *Childhood/Adolescence* or *Children/Adolescents* would be more consistent). The second part addresses another key question: “How do we study sexual development?” Part three asks “What roles might adults play?” and is divided into separate sections on media, family and education.

So the foundations and structure are sound. Get inside the building, though, and we begin to see that the promised interdisciplinary house of many mansions is disappointingly short of a few rooms. Just how short may be gleaned from the total absence of any of these terms in the book’s 570 or so main-text pages: “evolutionary psychology”, “evolutionary development”, “life history” (as in life history theory) or “coevolution” (as in gene-culture coevolution).

In a book on childhood sexual development some interest in evolution is indispensable, especially as regards the basic fact that a strikingly extended period of pre-reproductive juvenility has evolved in humans. It is a fact with profound implications. We cannot expect to understand what childhood is, or might become, or how it functions, without some insight into how and why childhood has come into existence at all as a recognisable and lengthy phase of our lives. As for childhood sexuality, it has long been a site of contested understandings, veering wildly between the post-Enlightenment assertion of children’s asexual “innocence”, in one direction, and their “polymorphous perversity” in Freud’s polar opposite view.

While biology alone does not resolve the debate, it should certainly inform it. Those who accept that children are sexual beings from birth, which mercifully none of the contributors to this volume disputes, need to be able to address, in particular, the biologically well grounded claim that human juvenility in the years before reproductive capacity begins is naturally a time for learning. As evolutionary development psychologist Marco Del Giudice says:

In biological terms, middle childhood corresponds to human juvenility – a stage in which the individual is still sexually immature but no longer depends on parents for survival. In social mammals and primates, juvenility is a phase of intense learning – often accomplished through play – in which youngsters practice adult behavioral patterns and acquire social and foraging skills (Del Giudice 2018).

Freud saw this time as a “latency period” when children’s sexuality is in abeyance. But is it? And, if not, is children’s sexual expression in these years inappropriately at odds with childhood’s learning function? Or is there such a thing as *sexual* learning that needs childhood space in which to be accommodated—and not necessarily just through school sex education lessons but also by the technique, often recommended in many other contexts, of *learning through doing*? Might not this be conceived as *rehearsal* in the years long before there is any possibility of reproduction, just as little girls have traditionally anticipated motherhood by playing with dolls?

Not that the latter point is so simple for psychoanalysts. Kathryn Bond Stockton, in an essay for *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*, noted that analysts:

wonder whether the girl who plays dolly is playing with herself or playing with the mother who plays with her child or playing with the child she would like to imagine is born from her sexual union with her mother (Irigaray famously wonders just this) (Stockton 2004).

One would be hard pressed to find a better example of imagination run riot, hurling Molotov cocktails not just at common sense but at any inquiry grounded in factual research or theory from which predictions can be made and tested. We need hardly be surprised that this same Luce Irigaray also denounced  $E=mc^2$  as a sexist equation because it “privileges the speed of light over other speeds” and hence cedes priority to “what goes the fastest”.

I mention it here not in order to accuse the *Cambridge Handbook* of being similarly unhinged and detached from empirical reality. Despite the riotously contending theories vying for attention within its pages, that would be grossly unfair: the writers engage with a great deal of properly researched information. Rather, I offer it as a cautionary consideration for those consulting this work. In a famous essay, geneticist Theodosius Dobzhansky proclaimed that nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution. For present purposes I propose that nothing in human values, or behaviour or “development”, however conceived, makes sense except in the light of biology. This is a vital anchoring appreciated by some of the *Handbook*’s contributors but the editors have failed to seize upon it as an imperative with regard to the essays they have commissioned and selected.

This is not an “essentialist” point. It is not about “genetic determinism” or constraining the concept of “sexual development” to one of the linear, chronological unfolding of normatively mandated correct ages and stages. Rather, it is about remembering that we are ineluctably flesh and blood, hormones and neurons, and that even our social systems and interactions have evolved as a biological response to environments. Nor is this intended to repudiate Foucault’s epistemic

scepticism and constructivist understandings of power/knowledge, hugely important as they are. It is, however, a point made in the belief that sociology and the other social sciences—including economics, supposedly the most rigorous of them—will always be vulnerable to appalling error and avoidable folly if they forget our biology. Witness the demise of *homo economicus*, the illusion that we behave in a rationally self-interested fashion, a belief that has taken us to mistaken and costly overreliance on market forces. Likewise *homo sociologicus*, the theory that we are written upon like blank slates by social forces, has feet of clay: it fails to ask where social forces come from, and why they are forceful. If sociology is ever to command respect on a par with physics it must fully engage with our physicality, from head to fleshy foot. Fact-free waffle about “embodiment” doesn’t hack it.

An endocrinal event not identified in Freud’s day turns out to be a key feature of middle childhood: the maturation of the adrenal glands, or adrenarche. It involves what Del Giudice calls a “temporary decoupling between physical and behavioral development, consistent with the idea of middle childhood as a sexually differentiated phase of social learning and experimentation”.

Yet very little mention is made of this in the *Cambridge Handbook*. The word “adrenarche” comes up briefly in just three of the book’s 28 chapters, authored respectively by Lisa M. Diamond, the late John DeLamater and Ritch C. Savin-Williams. We hear from DeLamater that the maturation of the adrenal glands “occurs around 8–10 years of age, and leads to increased levels of androgens in both girls and boys... The average age at which participants recalled first experiencing sexual attraction to another person was age 10 years, probably linked to the rise in androgens as a result of adrenarche...” Later he adds, “A study of Swedish high-school seniors asked them about consensual childhood sexual experiences... Eight percent of them recalled such an experience between the ages of 6 and 12 years; most occurred between the ages of 11 and 12 years, that is, probably after adrenarche.” Savin-Williams tells of “when the adrenal glands increase their production of hormones, creating an upsurge in the intensity of sexual and romantic attractions.”

Most of the other 47 contributors show little sign of any interest in biologically based information, although Lamb and Gilbert must be counted as exceptions, just about, for having commissioned what little does appear. So too must Celia Roberts, who works within “the interdisciplinary field of Feminist Technoscience Studies (FTS)” and who argues in her chapter “for a very different mode of thinking about puberty: one that troubles conventional distinctions between the biological, psychological, and the social”. She cites with apparent approval the work of biology and gender studies professor Anne Fausto-Sterling, who, with a background in zoology and developmental genetics has spent decades doggedly resisting genetic determinism.

This is excellent: such challenges made from positions of expertise deserve respect, although “the enemy” has in reality long been a straw man. It is biomedical scientists, after all, who discovered epigenetics and who were ahead of social science in their understanding of *culture’s* profound grip on the individual right down to their endocrine and neural molecular dynamics. When culture influences people’s minds it also invisibly, unconsciously, and profoundly changes their

bodies and feeds back through their physiology—guts as well as brains—into behavioural capacities and inclinations.

Diamond's chapter, "The dynamic expression of sexual-minority and gender-minority experience during childhood and adolescence" does a fine job of introducing epigenetics and neural plasticity but downplays the significance of the revolutionary research in this field for the *Cambridge Handbook* by saying the dynamic systems approach to which these advances point have not been substantially applied to gender and sexuality. She complains:

This reflects the fact that within developmental psychology, gender and sexuality continue to be conceptualized as human "essences" that may be "pushed against," but not fundamentally changed by social/environmental factors.

So the straw man has some muscle after all? The real point here, the *essential* point, if you will, is that fundamental change is indeed possible but may come at a price until we have fully adapted, as has been noted by such luminaries as Lisa's namesake Jared Diamond, who argued in *The World Until Yesterday* that modern lifestyles are in some ways at odds with our evolved nature. Likewise neuroscientist Melvin Konner felt able to conclude his stupendous 944-page treatise *The Evolution of Childhood* with the observation that:

...there may now be some discordance between our socialization patterns and children's biological preparedness, analogous to the proven discordance between our diets and activity and what is healthy given the genomes we evolved.... Socialization responds to subsistence ecology; it is designed not just to produce certain kinds of adults but for the convenience of adults, the efficiency of economic activity, and the enhancement of parental reproductive success. These purposes may depart from the best interests of the child (Konner 2011, p. 748).

Feminists are apt to be suspicious of "essentialist" texts on account of their perceived conservatism: evolutionary psychology has appeared to entrench a traditional patriarchal view of male and female roles. But we may find that for a really radical "critical" approach to child and adolescent sexualities we need to go "back to the future", looking afresh, with biology always in mind, at how to draw on the deep past when pondering the lifestyles of the young with their best interests uppermost in our thoughts.

So it is very regrettable that biology is largely absent from this would-be multidisciplinary volume, dominated as it is by gender theory and "intersectional" analysis. The long secular trend towards earlier puberty and its profound implications are barely mentioned. Even as regards "transgender children", there is remarkably little biologically informed discussion, including in the one chapter that focuses solely on trans concerns. Admittedly, it is a tough topic, contentious in ways at which my scare quotes barely even begin to hint. Notwithstanding multiple genuflections in the *Cambridge Handbook* to the work of Judith Butler—especially on gender as performance—I suggest that anyone brave enough

to confront this truly scary ontological horror story could do worse than catch up with “What Is Gender Identity? The elusive true gender self” by Alex Byrne, a specialist in the philosophy of mind at MIT (Byrne 2019).

Author Julia Sinclair-Palm covers a lot of difficult ground in her chapter, “Conceptualizing sexuality in research about trans youth” and does well to engage with the confusing—for experts as well as the youngsters themselves—relationship between trans identity and trans sexuality. One need only mention toilets and changing areas to be reminded that the sexuality of adult trans people is a thorny topic. For transgender children, too, these physical spaces in schools and elsewhere are contested; but, as Sinclair-Palm points out, youth have been “desexualised” and “there has been a failure to conceive of trans youth as sexual beings”. Where children are concerned, activist rhetoric has been largely about their subjective intuitions as to their own gender, as though such feelings spring out of nowhere and have nothing to do with biological inputs that also influence sexuality. Sinclair-Palm argues that there has been a deficit of research on trans youth sexuality, especially as regards the role it plays in their lives. Good point, but after setting out her wares it is already time to shut up shop, so that biological crisis points in the lives of trans youth—whether, or when, to take puberty blockers or (later) cross-sex hormones—are barely mentioned, much less discussed.

An even more stunning omission from a book on childhood sexual development is *children’s* sexual behaviour as opposed to that of adolescents. The very first chapter, to be sure, reviews a range of research on relevant data such as children’s masturbation, reported age at which sexual attraction typically begins, and so forth. Chapter 1 is titled “Are Children Sexual? Who, What, Where, When, and How?”, which suggests an attempt to cover this vital ground comprehensively.

Compared to much of the remainder of the book, though, the treatment of children’s sexual behaviour looks cramped and minimal, as though the editors cannot wait to move the discussion away from children’s actual sexual experiences, steering instead into safely obscure complexities of feminist and gender theory, and the less controversial field of adolescent sexuality. It cannot be merely coincidental that no fewer than 45 of the 50 contributors (90%) are female and 10 of them have either feminism or gender listed in the contributor notes as academic disciplines named in their job titles. Not that male contributors would be in a better position to do a good job. On the contrary, in any forum where “children” and “sex” are mentioned in the same sentence these days, men have every reason to feel their motives will be under suspicious scrutiny. That is bound to be severely inhibiting.

There are six chapters on “How do we study sexual development?” In the first of them, Sara I. McClelland speaks of “critical methods” in psychology:

In psychology, critical methods have often involved engaging with the history of the field, aiming to disrupt the colonial, racist, and homophobic structures that have determined what norms and procedures gain epistemic authority... In other words, which voices, theories, and methods have been institutionalized and which have been marginalized or delegitimized?

But “the history of the field” as regards the history of research into children’s sexual behaviour is largely avoided in this volume; and “structures”—arguably



not “colonial, racist, and homophobic” but ageist—appear to have ensured that children’s voices have been “marginalized or delegitimized” within its pages, just as in wider society.

As a case in point, not one of these six “How do we study” chapters pays attention to the results of direct observation of young children’s sexual behaviour. The book’s opening chapter mentions the name of pioneering researcher Floyd Martinson in this regard but that’s it: just a name check. Also overlooked from “the history of the field” by any of this volume’s authors was work coming out of Scandinavia in the 1980s, including an observation-rich book on the sexual behaviour of kindergarten children, *Barns kärleksliv* (Children’s Love Life) by Gertrude Aigner and Erik Centerwall. Published in Sweden in 1983, it features scenarios in which kindergarten staffs were able to observe and hear the goings on in a “Cosy Room” with comfy bedding, where the pre-schoolers are able to relax away from adult company (Aigner and Centerwall 1983).

The reports of their sexual activities are graphic and extensive, while the children’s verbal exchanges, as they “play” sexually, prove immensely revealing in terms of their expectations, surprises, delights and beliefs. In more recent years, social science researcher IngBeth Larrson, commissioned by the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare to report on the results of research into child sexuality and sexual behaviour noted that:

...in the 1970s and 1980s, in the spirit of sexual liberalisation, some pedagogical literature on children and sexuality was published in Sweden. The books were based on the idea of ‘good sexuality’ and included advice on how adults could teach small children to masturbate using a good technique and how day-care staff could encourage children to play explorative games of ‘doctors and nurses’” (Larrson 2001).

*Barns kärleksliv* is one of the books Larrson mentions. While the idea of adults teaching children to masturbate is guaranteed to outrage, a searchingly critical investigation would be more reflective and less inclined towards knee-jerk presentist dismissal of all thinking before the current era of hegemonic #MeToo. An attentive reading of Aigner and Centerwall would reveal, for instance, the detailed and effective engagement of the kindergarten staffs of the time with the tricky question of how to allow sexual freedom for children while avoiding harassment of one child by another. Their debates over power play (*maktspill*) amongst the children, and indeed between children and staff, are well worth re-visiting.

Given that such *maktspill* is an issue from kindergarten onwards, an even more surprising omission from the *Cambridge Handbook* is that of children’s “sexual behaviour problems” (SBPs), which are only touched upon briefly, in the first chapter. This makes sense to the extent that coercive behaviour is strongly associated with non-sexual problems, notably early trauma within a physically or emotionally abusive family; hence not an issue of *sexual* development per se but of general social development. This does not mean, as the authors imply, perhaps unintentionally—going as it does against the *Handbook* in its totality—that all sexual activity between children constitutes pathological “acting out”, attributable to early trauma/abuse.

Neither does it dispose of SBPs as a matter demanding more thorough treatment. Even while considerable space is devoted to the sexual development of gay and other minority youth, a veil of total silence is drawn over the plight of proto-paedophilic minors: those adolescents coming to be aware of their attraction to much younger children. In Britain and the U.S. approximately one third of all those registered as sex offenders are minors. This would be a major issue even if none of them had offended against significantly younger children, but that is not the case: paedophiles do not, as adults, spring out of nowhere; these young registrants inevitably include those whose primary attraction is to prepubescent or pubescent children. And the numbers of those who are attracted to children but do not offend could be far greater. Given the stigma attached to their preference, the bleak requirement of lifelong celibacy that exclusive paedophiles face, plus the disasters in prospect for them and for their younger partners/victims if they fail, there is absolutely no aspect of sexual development that is of greater public importance. Scandalously, though, it is simply ignored in these pages.

Finally, I cannot let pass without comment the editors' dubious claim in the Introduction that this book is the "first of its kind". It is not. Or not, at least, if "its kind" means a hefty, cross-disciplinary, multi-author work on child and adolescent sexual development. Ray Blanchard, septuagenarian doyen of psychosexual research, is apt to chide his colleagues from time to time, saying "sexology has no hippocampus". Nobody remembers anything! Even those undertaking formal literature reviews may overlook work of continuing importance simply because it is old. In this case the earlier work was *Sexual Development in Childhood*, published in 2003 and edited by John Bancroft, then director of the Kinsey Institute (Bancroft 2003). Running to 456 pages and featuring 29 essays, it was a work of remarkably similar scale, scope and ambition to the *Cambridge Handbook*. Also, Bancroft's *opus*, just like the *Handbook*, acknowledged that normal childhood sexual development is an elusive target of investigation, not least because normative expectations are so culturally variable.

Beyond that, the two volumes are very different. As the *Handbook* editors say in their Introduction "...we did not want to attempt an authoritative volume that would falsely claim a sense of coherence to the field called 'sexual development.'" Instead, they wanted to "stage an interdisciplinary conversation amongst leading sexuality scholars". Sadly, unlike Bancroft's book, which reports *actual* conversations from workshop discussions of the contributors' papers (and the editor draws strands together in a concluding essay), the *Handbook* is almost a confusion of tongues. The overall effect feels less "carefully curated" than the editors would have us believe: not so much interdisciplinary as somewhat undisciplined. As already indicated, though, the book's heart is in the right place and there is much in it that is worth reading.

## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of interest** The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

**Ethical Approval** This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by the author.

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